
Obituaries

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Phil Anthony Richard Hockey: 1956–2013

Enthusiastic birder and ornithologist, Phil Hockey died on 24 January 2013 following a year-long battle with cancer. At the time, he was the Director of the University of Cape Town's Percy FitzPatrick Institute of African Ornithology. Among birders, he is best known as lead editor of the seventh edition of *Roberts—Birds of Southern Africa* (2005), a major project that saw *Roberts* 'reinvented' as a fully referenced handbook. Phil also was an author of the much-loved field guide *SASOL Birds of Southern Africa*, which is still going strong in its fourth edition 20 years after it was first published, and he wrote numerous other books on birds, including a monograph *Waders of Southern Africa*.

Over his long and distinguished career, Phil published more than 120 scientific papers covering a diverse array of subjects, from penguins to

bustards, and from gulls to warblers. And, although much of his research had a strong applied nature, from the impacts of human disturbance, resource use, pollution and climate change, he also made important contributions to our understanding of the roles of birds in rocky shore ecosystems, and how food production determines migration strategies. Phil also was a strong advocate of making the science of birds accessible to the broader public. He wrote hundreds of popular articles for birding and more general magazines, and in 2008 he was awarded the Stevenson-Hamilton Medal for his contributions to the public awareness of science.

Phil was born in Bournemouth and grew up in Gloucestershire in the UK. He developed an early interest in natural history, particularly birds. In 1976, while studying for his B.Sc.



Phil Hockey in his youth (photographer unknown)



Phil Hockey in later years (Samantha Hockey)

in Ecological Science at Edinburgh University, Phil assisted Ron Summers with a study of the breeding biology of White-fronted Plovers *Charadrius marginatus* at Langebaan Lagoon. After completing his first degree, he returned to the University of Cape Town with his first wife Carole first to register for a Ph.D. on African Oystercatchers *Haematopus moquini*. For much of this study he was based on Marcus Island, at the entrance to Saldanha Bay, where he conducted research on oystercatchers and their impacts on rocky shore biota. After graduating, Phil held a series of contract positions at the FitzPatrick Institute, until he was appointed as a lecturer there in 1986. His initial research focused mainly on shorebirds and their interactions with their food supplies. This work took Phil and his students to tropical Africa and islands in the Indian Ocean, as well as South America, the Canary Islands and the Middle East. He also was instrumental in setting up the atlas of birds in the south-western Cape, which was the forerunner of the first South African Bird Atlas Project, and he ran the bird component of a co-operative scientific programme on the ecology of the Karoo.

But oystercatchers remained his first love, and when evidence emerged that African Oystercatcher populations were in trouble, he initiated a large-scale programme to improve their conservation status. This was partly responsible for the banning of 4x4 vehicles on South African beaches, a measure which has had far-reaching conservation benefits that extend well beyond the benefits conferred on the oystercatchers. He also established a network of coastal observers who collected a wealth of data on the birds around the coast, many of whom became passionate advocates for coastal conservation. By the time of his death, there were more oystercatchers than when he started studying them three decades ago.

Phil retained a love for birds throughout his life, and was always happy to talk to other birders. He was a great raconteur, and consequently a sought-after speaker to bird clubs and more general audiences. For many years he was the Chairman of the Southern African Rarities Committee, and led regular birding trips to northern Namibia. He also had a strong passion for the Kalahari, typically visiting in midsummer when lesser mortals quailed at the intense heat. It was perhaps this experience, as much as his frustration with the woolly arm-waving about the potential impacts of climate change on birds, that prompted Phil to start the 'hot birds' research programme in the mid 2000s. This project is developing robust estimates of the impacts of extreme temperature events on desert birds, which will greatly improve our ability to predict the likely consequences of ongoing global warming.

Apart from his academic contributions, Phil was a good sportsman, playing a mean game of tennis and squash. He had an encyclopedic knowledge and an agile mind, and was renowned for devising bird-related puzzles for magazines. He also had a wicked sense of humour that remained steadfastly politically incorrect to the end, even after being appointed as Director of the Fitztitute in 2008. The large number of people from all walks of life who travelled from literally all over the world to attend his farewell party is testament to the man's charisma. As Barry Lovegrove said, Phil "understood the trade-offs of life better than anyone. His passion for birds, science, female post-grads, booze, cigarettes, parties, a good hypothesis, and the Kalahari, was breathtaking". He is sorely missed by his extended family at the Fitz. Our condolences go to Phil's wife Samantha and his family in the UK.

Peter G. Ryan